

## "I" MESSAGES

"I" messages for expressing feelings and accepting responsibility for your feelings.

This is one of the most important skills you can acquire. A good rule of thumb is: "If you have a problem, make an 'I' statement. If you are helping someone with a problem, make empathy responses." An "I" statement consists of a description of how you feel and an indication of the conditions under which you feel that way. It takes this form: "I feel (*your emotions*) when (*under what conditions*)."

It will be helpful if you recognize how many decisions *you* have made in the process of becoming emotional or upset. We have already discussed how feelings develop in great detail in chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8. Also chapter 12 reviews how emotions develop and explains how we understand (make sense out of) our own internal emotional reactions by observing the circumstances we are in, i.e. "I am mad because you seem to be neglecting me" or "I am scared (or excited) in front of a large audience." Building on this cognitive approach, David Johnson (1981) says several things must happen--your decisions--before feelings get communicated: (1) we must perceive what is going on, (2) we interpret, rightly or wrongly, the situation (what is motivating the other person's actions, are those causes good or bad?), (3) we use our view of the situation--our interpretation of why the other person did whatever he/she did--to decide exactly what it is we are feeling, (4) our feelings prompt us to take some kind of action, but (5) our intentions (to hurt, to avoid, to help, etc.) determine how our feelings actually get expressed or handled. (6) Finally, as discussed in chapter 12, we may decide to conceal our feelings, deny them, repress them, convert them into physical symptoms, blame others and demand that others change, or express them inappropriately or appropriately, as in self-disclosure or "I" statements. Or, of course, if we don't like our feelings, we can try to change them (see chapters 12 and 14). There are lots of places in this getting-upset process where we alone are responsible for the choices we make (although we are often tempted to blame someone else for upsetting us).

In short, from the cognitive viewpoint, how we handle our feelings is based on *our* perceptions, *our* attributions, *our* understanding of what we are feeling, and *our* intentions. Thus, as humanistic-existentialistic therapists have also contended for a long time, *we are responsible* for our feelings, because *we have chosen*, through each of 5 or 6 steps, to feel whatever we feel (no matter how miserable), so we must "own" our feelings. In short, no one can *make* us feel any way; we decide. (Note: Freudians, learning theorists, sociobiologists, drug-oriented psychiatrists, physiologists with interests in hormones, genes and neurotransmitters, and many others may not agree with this highly conscious, cognitive explanation of emotions.)

Regardless of the etiology of feelings, suppressing or denying our feelings may lead to several problems: (1) increased irritability and conflicts with others, (2) difficulty resolving interpersonal problems (being "logical" doesn't mean ignoring feelings, but dealing with them), (3) distorted perception and blind spots (like seeing only the bad parts of a person we are mad at in a relationship, and (4) other people may suspect we have feelings and ask us to be honest with them (which is hard to do if we are being dishonest with ourselves--or unaware). These are good reasons for expressing our feelings in a tactful, constructive manner. "I" statements serve this purpose.

"I" statements do not judge, blame, threaten, put down or try to control others; they simply report how you feel, which is rarely challengeable by anyone else. When you make an "I" statement, you are taking responsibility for your emotions. "I" statements inform others about your feelings and, thus, may lead to change, but they do not demand change or direct others. They leave the other person responsible and free to decide if he/she will change to accommodate your needs.

## **Purposes**

Consider using "I" statements:

- Any time you want to share your feelings or desires in a frank, unthreatening, undemanding way. When you are trying to disclose more about yourself to build a relationship.
- Any time stress is experienced in a relationship, especially if you are feeling angry or dissatisfied or if the other person is resistive to changing in response to your requests or demands.
- If both parties have problems, i.e. both of you can take turns giving "I" statements and giving empathy responses.
- If the other person is using a lot of "you" (blaming, critical) statements, try to translate them into "I" statements and empathize with the accuser's feelings.

## **Steps**

**STEP ONE: Understand when to use and how to use "I" statements in place of "you" statements and other harmful statements.**

In order to communicate our feelings clearly, we must, of course, be aware of them, comfortable or at least accepting of them, and able to accurately express the feelings in words. When we lack this awareness, acceptance, or verbal skill, our feelings are likely to be expressed indirectly and ineffectively, as in these "you" statements (adapted partly from Johnson, 1981):  
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### **You statements**

*Blaming:* "You make me so mad."

*Judging or labeling:* "You are an inconsiderate, hostile, arrogant creep."

*Accusing:* "You don't give a damn about me!"

*Ordering:* "You shut up!"

*Questioning:* "Are you always this flirtatious?" or "Why did you do that? I feel like slapping your face."

*Arguing:* "You don't know what you are talking about."

*Sarcasm:* "Of course, you are an expert!"

*Approving:* "You are wonderful."  
"You are attractive."

*Disapproval:* "You are terrible."

*Threatening:* "You had better..."

*Moralizing:* "You ought to ..."

*Treating:* "You need to rest and..."

*Supporting:* "It will get better."

*Analyzing:* "You can't stand to leave your mother!"

### **"I" statements**

"I feel angry when you \_\_\_\_\_. " Or, "I have chosen to let it bother me when you \_\_\_\_\_."

"I feel betrayed when you criticize me in front of others."

"I feel neglected when you avoid me."

"I feel annoyed when you call me names and make fun of me."

"I really feel insecure about our relationship when you flirt."

"I feel convinced it is this way."

"I would like you a lot more if you were a bit more humble."

"I really am impressed with your \_\_\_\_\_ and besides I like you. I am attracted to you."

"I feel crushed when you seem only interested in spending my money."

"I'd like it if you'd ..."

"I think it would be fair for you to..."

"I'd like to be helpful to you."

"I'm sorry you feel ..."

"I'm disappointed that you are so reluctant to leave..."

Note that many of the "you" statements are intended to exert power, to control, to intimidate, or to put down the other person. They are not statements made by non-judgmental, mutually respecting equals. They are authoritarian statements made by manipulators. That's why Gordon (1975) recommended "I" statements to parents when talking to children. Watch out for "you" statements.

Personal responsibility is avoided in other ways too: we use "we," "it" or "they" when we are trying to depersonalize our comment and/or vaguely conceal our feelings or opinions. Sometimes we use "we" when trying to make it sound like a lot of people agree with us, while in reality no one has authorized us to speak for them. We should take responsibility for expressing our own opinions or feelings.

Examples:

**We, it, they statements**

"Most people would have an affair if they wouldn't get caught."

"The group isn't interested in ..."

"The glass slipped out of my hand."

"People have a hard time with math."

"The group is trying to help you."

"This weather is depressing."

"This class is boring."

**"I" statements**

"I would have an affair if..."

"I don't think the group cares..."

"I dropped the glass."

"I am ashamed of my math score."

"I want to understand you but I'm having a hard time."

"I feel depressed."

"I feel bored."

The last example above shows how our language also causes us problems. It is important to be aware that *personal opinions sound like facts* when one uses a form of "am" or "is," such as "you are...", "I am...", "it is..." and so on. Furthermore, in addition to sounding factual, such statements imply the whole person is a certain way and will be forever. Example: "You are selfish" is a pronouncement which implies that there are no unselfish traits anywhere in the person's personality--and that the entire person will stay that way forever. This is probably untrue; it is an over-generalization. It would be much more accurate and effective to say, "I resent it when you make plans for the entire family without asking what the rest of us want to do."

When personal opinions are stated as facts, it is no wonder that arguments arise. Note the use of "is" in this example:

**Person A:** "This class *is* a lot of work but it contains useful information."

**Person B:** "This class *is* a complete waste of time."

These two people could debate the merits and faults of the class for an hour. It could degenerate into a personal conflict, like "You're the teacher's pet" and "You wouldn't like anything that required a brain" and go on and on. On the other hand, if A and B had made "I" statements there would have been no argument.

**Person A:** "I really like the self-help class, especially the group."

**Person B:** "I'm disappointed in that class because I'm not getting anything out of my group or those ridiculously long readings."

In this case, A and B can see that they have responded very differently to the same class. There can be no argument about that. The class isn't inevitably great or terrible; it meets many peoples' needs but not everyone's. After the "I" statements, A and B could discuss their differences and learn more about themselves, each other, their groups, and the class.

In summary,

- An "I" statement may have 2 to 4 parts: (a) it is a self-disclosure, referring to "I," "me" or "my," (b) it expresses a feeling, urge or impulse, (c) it may describe the other person's behavior which is related to your feelings, and (d) it may indicate what you would like to see changed, much like an assertive statement.
- Assume responsibility for your feelings and opinions, don't hide behind the "it" or the editorial "we."
- Avoid stating personal opinions as facts and avoid the over-generalizations sometimes implied by forms of the verb "to be," like "are," "is," "am" and so on..

Clearly, giving an "I" statement is more constructive than giving an order, an accusation, a moral judgment, and so on. However, this is not an easy concept to grasp. The pronoun "you" is used all the time, many uses are not bad. Try to become aware of the undesirable ways you use "you."

#### **STEP TWO: Look for opportunities to use "I" statements.**

Review the examples of "you" and "we" statements above and see if any remind you of possible situations in your life. If so, make some notes on how you could handle such situations differently in the future and perhaps plan to arrange an opportunity to try out "I" statements.

Pay special attention to stressful relationships or when you want to communicate in sensitive areas, such as sex, anger, submissiveness and others.

Look over the purposes mentioned above. Do any apply to you? If so, give some thought to how you can handle the situations better.

#### **STEP THREE: Practice giving "I" messages in your daily conversations.**

Most of us (me too!) find it hard to change our speech patterns. We feel awkward. "I" statements seem counter to what we have been taught in English classes, "Don't say I, I, I." We are self-conscious about focusing on ourselves. It takes practice to get comfortable with "I" statements. Role-playing (method #1) may be a good way to start seeing how well they work.

Keep watching for opportunities in casual conversations to express a feeling or an opinion tactfully. Act quickly, as soon as you are aware of a feeling say, "I am feeling..." Most people are interested in genuine feelings, especially if the feelings involve them. It is nourishment for growing friendships. Tell yourself that one of the best ways to resolve a conflict is for all relevant factors to be considered in

arriving at a "no-lose" solution (see method #10). Your feelings, needs, and preferences are important factors! So are the other person's. Feelings have to be shared, diplomatically.

### **Time involved**

The idea of an "I" statement is easy, monitoring your thinking and speech to catch blaming, judging, controlling "you" statements is not easy. This takes time. If you have a problem in this area and carefully concentrated on it for a week, you would be expressing yourself differently.

### **Common problems**

Many of us experience such strong (unexpressed) needs to be blameless, to blame the circumstances or others, to change others and so on, that it is difficult to avoid using whatever "power" we think we have to control others. "You" statements seem to come naturally.

If you decide to openly disclose some strong feelings, many people will quickly urge you to suppress your feelings. For example, if you tell a person, "I'm really depressed," the person is likely to say, "Cheer up!" or, in other words, "Don't talk about it." Strong emotions make some people uncomfortable; disclose slowly with them.

It is quite common for a beginning psychology participant to become so obsessed with what words he/she is using that the concern with how-to-say-it is inhibiting. A learner can lose his/her emotional spontaneity for a while, until the new skill is well learned. Later, you will be a better communicator of feelings than ever before--at least more clear and tactful. Another confusion is that empathy responses (method #2) are often "you" statements. However, "you feel..." in empathy is a tentative, inquiring statement, whereas "you are..." statements are dogmatic oversimplifications. There is a big difference in intent, if not in actual words.

In some cases, depending in part on your tone of voice and demeanor, an "I" statement may not differ greatly from a "you" statement. If a parent yells, "I feel furious and want to beat the hell out of you when you don't do your work and get smartalecky," this is similar to "You are a smart-mouthed, defiant little punk." Blame is clearly indicated in this angry "I" statement, and it certainly makes demands on the child. This can become a power struggle. Ideally, non-blaming "I" statements should lead into problem-solving and better relations. A no-lose approach would work better (see method #10).

## **Effectiveness, advantages and dangers**

There is little or no research assessing the effectiveness of this method, although several writers praise it, as I do.

There are certain apparent advantages as mentioned above. "I" statements do not offend as much; they may reduce defiance and encourage compliance. Also, as you formulate "I" statements in your own head, you become more aware of your true feelings. Likewise, explaining yourself to another person often clears up your own thinking and views about a troublesome situation.

"I" statements are more likely to improve a relationship, certainly better than demanding, whining, asking accusatory questions, manipulating, accusing, and criticizing will do. There are no known dangers, except the problems mentioned in e above.

**Additional readings:**

1. Ciaramicoli, A. I. & Ketcham, K. (2001). *The power of empathy*. Plume.
2. Gordon, T. (1975). *Parent effectiveness training*. New York:
3. Peter H. Wyden, Inc. Johnson, D. (1981). *Reaching out: Interpersonal effectiveness and self-actualization*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.